New Directions in Coach Education Research

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Abstract: There has been substantial growth in the provision of, and importance attached to, coach education in many Western countries in particular, but there is also an emerging interest in the developing world (Gilbert & Trudel, 1999; Lyle, 2002). Yet this growth in interest has not resulted in a corresponding increase in research activity. Much of the focus of the existing coach education literature has been on coach development and learning (Cushion, Armour,& Jones, 2003; Malete et al, 2000; Sage, 1989; Weiss et al, 1991), coaching behavior and coach effectiveness training in the context of youth sports (Smith & Smoll, 1990; Smith, Smoll, & Barnett, 1995; Smoll et al.,1993) and the problems associated with the privileging of technical, tactical, and bio-scientific knowledges that have been characteristic features of much coach education provision (Abraham & Collins, 1998; Campbell, 1993; Potrac et al, 2000; Schempp, 2000). While this scholarship has provided valuable insights into some aspects of coach education, it underlines the absence of research addressing a range of topics such as the development of coach education curricula, the structures for coach learning, coaches' learning processes and coach certification (Gilbert & Trudel, 2000). In this paper we discuss a new theoretical frame for coach education research centered on the idea of communities of practice.

Key Words: Communities of Practice, Situated Learning, Coach Education

Communities of Practice as a theoretical frame for coaching research: The potential for CoP as a principle of learning in coaching is profound. As Wenger et al (2002) say "[t]he knowledge of experts is an accumulation of experience – a kind of 'residue' of their actions, thinking and conversations – that remains a dynamic part of their ongoing experience" (p.9). In describing knowledge, they argue that CoP do not objectify knowledge, rather they "make it an integral part of their activities and interactions, and they serve as a living repository for that knowledge" (p.9). What also comes across from the Wenger et al's analysis, and what appears to fit with the coaching paradigm, is the idea of a structural model. It is unreasonable to suggest that all CoPs are identical however Wenger et al argue that there are similar structural elements common to all CoPs. These are a *domain* of knowledge*,* a *community* of people, and the *shared practices*. The domain includes both common ground (of what is known) and a common identity (by being co-joined in the knowledge) which becomes legitimised through the shared practices of the membership, a consequence of which is that it is ascribed a *value.* This *value* provides a motivation for the members to continue to participate. The *community* then is the social fabric of learning. The learning under these circumstances is a social process and as such it demands trust, respect and commitment. The *practices* are the frameworks, tools, mechanisms, even language (or broader literacies – see Rossi & Ryan, 2006) that the members use to further develop, implement and to evaluate their domain. This Wenger et al argue is what enables the CoPs to form *knowledge structures.*

Wenger (1998) argues that learning is a transformative experience or as he prefers to term it an 'experience of identity.' So learning for Wenger is not just about an accumulation of skills and information but more about 'becoming.' Not surprisingly then the primary focus of Wenger's (1998) social theory of learning is "on learning as social participation" (p.4) within the *practices* of communities as well as constructing *identities* in relation to these communities. Wenger's

(1998) theory is framed by two key components, theories of social practice and theories of identity which he argues underpin learning within communities. Theories of *social practice* he suggests "address the production and reproduction" (p.13) of our everyday activity, with a focus on how "groups organize and coordinate their activities, mutual relationships, and interpretations of the world" (p.13). Theories of *identity* are concerned with how a person becomes socially formed as a consequence of participation, this includes the "cultural interpretation of the body, and the creation and use of markers of membership such as rites of passage and social categories" (p.13). He goes on to contend that the process of learning in a community is a "vehicle for the evolution of practices and the inclusion of newcomers while also (and through the same process) the vehicle for the development and transformation of identities" (p.13). However, for learning to be the vehicle, the community has to have some coherence and here Wenger suggests this requires three dimensions to be present, namely the participants have to be *mutually engaged* in *a joint enterprise* in which they have is a *shared repertoire*.

Communities of Practice in Operation: The coaching literature is beginning to show these dimensions in operation. For example the elite coaches interviewed by Jones et al (2004) showed a remarkable incidence of these dimensions in the descriptions of their learning. Cassidy, Potrac and Allen, (2006) highlight how these dimensions affect players' interpretations of practices and relationships. For example it is apparent how interpretations of belonging differ between those who are more centrally located within the community and those who are on the periphery [7]. Furthermore, the coaches' sense of belonging appears to be central to their desire and motivation to learn, develop and perform.

In the research of Jones et al (2004) it is apparent that all of the elite high performing coaches talked about the value of learning from others. Steve Harrison, the English Premier League football coach even suggested that it was possible to learn from everyone. What is also interesting is that all the coaches recognised their social role as being important to their instructional role. The coaching role was seen as much broader in scope with the notion of 'care' being important. Research has also shown that coaches perceive formal and informal conversations with other coaches to be as valuable to their professional development, if not more so, than the purely theoretical and cognitive knowledge delivered by coach educators as a part of formal coach education schemes (Cassidy, Potrac & McKenzie, in press; Fleurance & Cotteaux, 1999; Jones, Armour & Potrac, 2003; Saury & Durand, 1998). Such a situation may be attributed to the fact that such conversations are often grounded in the everyday realities of coaching and, as such, are more focused on practical solutions to the professional problems and issues that coaches have to contend with within their respective coaching environments (Jones et al 2003).

Cassidy, Jones and McKenzie (in press) found that the coaches participating in a Coach Development program for New Zealand rugby coaches (CoDe) considered that they had benefited from the round table discussions, yet they did voice the need for the facilitators to exert some control over the direction and length of the discussions if they were to be of optimal value. Cassidy et al (in press) conclude that the "value coaches attached to their interactions with each other during the CoDe program supports the benefit of utilizing a situated view of learning in the design and delivery of coach education interventions" (unpaginated manuscript). Using this and similar findings (Culver & Trudel, in press; Trudel & Gilbert, 2004) could provide coach educators with a platform for the (re)examination of apprenticeships and mentoring within a Communities of Practice model. Moreover, "viewing learning as a situated activity could support the development of curricula that focuses on the learner and learning rather than primarily on instruction and the instructor" and provide some legitimacy for "the learners to be viewed as a significant data source" (unpaginated manuscript).

Trudel and Gilbert (1993), point out that coaches, particularly elite level coaches, tend "proceed from athletes to assistant coaches, where they may spend five or more years. This process may be referred to as an example of legitimate peripheral participation, which, as described above, is

about the relations between old-timers and newcomers, identities, artifacts activities, and communities of knowledge and practice. If learning is considered to take place in a participatory framework and not in an individual mind then it is "by virtue of their membership in the community" that coaches (assistant and head) and athletes "can play their roles" (Wenger 1998, p. 100). There is a growing case being made for coach education provision to prepare coaches to recognize and deal with the social nature of the coaching environment as well as being willing and able to view coaching as a learning process and not simply a doing process. It also points to the desirability for apprenticeship models which use a mentoring approach to be structured around Wenger's (1998) dimensions of communities of practice so that coaches, assistant coaches and the athletes work is structured in ways that enable them to be mutually engaged, feel part of a joint enterprise and develop a shared repertoire.

Some final thoughts - a cautionary sting in the tale: We acknowledge that it may not be immediately obvious how a CoP framework can happen. For instance coaching, like sport, is contestable and may appear to be at odds with the idea of a 'community' and the principle of coach learning that we advocate. However our view is that this should not deter the field in terms of practice, theorizing coach learning or coaching research. If the contested nature of coaching mitigates against a CoP model then the communities of practice may need to be smaller and exist within clubs and organizations or even smaller units where a head coach and mentee coaches can learn from each other through mutual sharing and reflection. This situation we believe can also have a more formal arrangement for mentoring based on mutual choice, something the literature suggests is desirable. Maybe such arrangements should be expected (rather than mandated) as part of a coach education model within organizations to encourage a sense of community, after all improved sporting performance is the real goal and better informed coaches one assumes can help to achieve this.

We are mindful that any group that appears to have a common purpose may well in fact limit its achievement by imposing artificial boundaries around what can be considered conventional practice; these kinds of limits are commonplace in teaching for example. However, Wenger's (1998) definition and description of CoPs are underpinned by a constructivist form of learning that acknowledges the life worlds of the participants and focuses on human practice and identity. Hence we feel that the emphasis on a social theory of learning whereby the engagement in a social practice is the central process by which learning takes place is a more fruitful way to think about how coaches can come to 'know'. Moreover, this tends to add weight to the position that coach education needs to be based around the social practice in question which means that any accreditation process would need to place the situated learning (within CoP) in coaching at the centre of the process rather than be an 'add-on' requirement. Inevitably this means a rethinking of how coach learning is assessed for the purposes of accreditation.

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